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ABSTRACT

A mother of two adopted deaf sons, who is also a faculty member at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, explores the roles of parents and teachers in forming an educational team. The paper aims to help educators understand the difficulties faced by parents of deaf children. The paper's 15 considerations in the relationship between parents and teachers include: (1) remember that teachers choose to work with deaf children, but parents did not choose to have deaf children; (2) get acquainted with the family or home situation of the child; (3) don't assume the parents know much about deafness; (4) parents are not to blame for all their children's difficulties; (5) be aware of the ramifications of the various communication methodologies before pushing a "pet" one onto parents; (6) try to help parents learn the communication mode preferred by the child; (7) parents can help teachers get what they think a child needs, and can help teachers meet their own needs as well; (8) give parents good news more often than bad news; (9) help integrated deaf children and their parents get to know deaf adults or at least older deaf students; (10) give parents information about the child's program in writing; and (11) help parents to see that equal access and equal opportunity also mean equal responsibility. (JDD)

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PARENTS AND TEACHERS: FOES OR ALLIES?

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Introduction

The most satisfying information I have read recently is that educators are agreeing, finally, that parental involvement with education is a crucial variable in the child's success. An educational "team approach" is necessary. As I am a parent of deaf sons, these research findings are particularly satisfying to me. As an educator, however, the findings create new problems. Working with deaf students is difficult enough: now I have to deal with their parents, too? A basic problem presents itself: in suggesting that parents and teachers form a team, what do each of the team members need to know or do?

In planning this presentation, I have discovered conflicting emotions within myself. I am a faculty member at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). My husband Fred and I have two deaf sons, now in their 20's, one in NTID and one in an independent living arrangement, well on his way toward being self-supporting. We adopted Bob, now 24, when he was 5, and Joel, now 25, when he was 9. Neither of them had any language when they came to live with us, and we were their first teachers. But it seems to me that **all** parents are their children's first teachers, and that perhaps one of the difficulties of sending children to school is this relinquishing of the teacher role, giving responsibility to others, without knowing exactly what is happening to the child, and having no sense of involvement in the educational process.

Of course, our situation with Bob and Joel was different from those of most parents of deaf children. We knew they were deaf, and both Fred and I had several year's experience with deafness. We knew sign language, knew the deaf education system, and were both faculty members at NTID. We quickly found, however, that we knew very little about deaf **children**, and even less about the appropriate ways to interact with the deaf education system as parents. We found that the deaf education system did not seem to welcome our interactions. Rather, it seemed to want to prevent our interaction altogether.

When we approached the deaf-education professionals as peers, we had credibility. But when we wore our "parent hats", we suddenly became the enemy. The first few years of the boys' schooling, pre-Public Law 94-142, were extremely difficult years for us, and because of that experience I have such sincere empathy for all parents of deaf children and at the same time, sympathy for the teachers of their children. For us, 94-142 was like a granting of independence, an acknowledgement that we had rights and responsibilities in our children's schooling. Next we had to learn how to accept those rights, and how to fulfill the responsibilities. Teachers also had to learn how to interact with parents in a new way. The "rules of the game" changed for everyone.

At the same time, we were both working with tertiary deaf students at NTID, and often had to deal with <u>their</u> parents. These dealings were not always positive, and we would despairingly ask, "Why don't these people leave us alone?" Talk about schizophrenia!! I'm sure that all educators who also have children in any school system must feel much the same, whether their children are disabled or not.

My purpose in this paper is not to lecture teachers on "How to Handle Parents", but to share some experiences and thoughts, and hopefully to help educators understand some of the difficulties faced by parents of deaf children. My focus is to think about how educators can assist the parents of their students to

accept their role in the educational team. Perhaps in thinking through these difficulties, we can see better why parents often need special understanding. Perhaps we can also think of other points and strategies that will assist us as educators to help parents know how to be better participants in the education of their children.

Though there are obviously many considerations in the relationship between parents and teachers, I submit the following topics for consideration.

1. *Always remember, teachers chose to work with deaf children. The parents did not choose to have deaf children.* Even parents of high school-aged students may not yet have dealt with the trauma, pain, guilt and sense of loss in discovering they have a deaf child. I have interacted with parents whose children are in their 20's, who are still grieving, and have no one to talk with about it. Usually when a child is diagnosed as deaf, all the care and planning goes to the child, and little to the parents. It is not fashionable nowadays to talk about "grieving" about deafness, or seeing it as a disability, an impairment. But, fashionable or not, it is real for parents, and denying it only makes it worse. Far better to acknowledge and deal with it.

2. *Get acquainted with the family or home situation of the child.* Even with adopted children, we had to give continual attention to others in our extended family -- grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins -- if they were ever going to feel comfortable interacting with Bob and Joel. We tried, also, to give Joel and Bob strategies for explaining their own needs, interacting with people new to deafness, etc., a skill I think is very important. This is even more important when the deaf child is born into the family. Teachers might have some impact on this situation, if only by giving parents opportunities to talk about it. From our experience as parents, ducators of the deaf who stand out as most effective are those who tried to get to know us as a family. Having even a superficial understanding of the family situation, having visited their home once, seeing pictures of grandparents, knowing where the summer vacations were spent and the like can give teachers a much broader base of knowledge about the child. At NTID, we do not meet the parents very often, but when this is possible I always relish the opportunity and urge students to invite their parents to the campus. It seems to me that the more we know about students as people, the better the educational experiences will be.

3. *Don't assume the parents really know much about deafness.* Professionals have had several year's preparation to work with deafness. The parents had little or no preparation in being parents, much less parents of deaf children. I will never forget talking with a mother who was a professional musician. Her 6-year-old child had just recovered from meningitis, only to be diagnosed as profoundly deaf. She sobbed, "I don't know what to dream anymore. My dreams have died." A sensitive teacher will assist this parent in finding **new** dreams, to realize that the child is still a child of whom the parent can be proud and can have unlimited aspirations.

4. *Try to give parents plain-language information on deafness.* Help them understand the nature of the hearing loss, how much residual hearing the child has, and what reasonable expectations are in relation to speech capabilities, etc. Teachers may be their only source of understandable information. I have talked with parents who told me their child had a "50% hearing loss" -- what does that mean?

Understanding the difference between nerve deafness, conductive loss and the like will alleviate the parents' confusions, and help them develop new dreams, new expectations. But don't expect them to become enamored with audiograms, either!

5. *Understand the devastation of being told a child is deaf, and why it is so de- vastating.* Give the parents some empathy, much as would be given the parents of a seriously ill child. I am aghast at the lack of sensitivity of the medical profession. Imagine the parents of a seemingly perfect young son who hasn't learned to talk as soon as his older sister did. For months, they have tried to get their physician to discuss this, only to be told, "Now, now -- you're just worrying too much. Give him time -- he'll grow out of it." When the deafness was finally diagnosed, the findings were given abruptly, without any sense of the devastating effect of hearing such news, and without any suggestions for the next step. "Your child is deaf. Goodbye."

6. *Parents are not to blame for all their children's difficulties.* Teachers should take care not to fall into the habit of thinking, "Why don't those parents...?" I will always remember one teacher of the deaf who told me, "Well, we all know that deaf children of deaf parents don't have these problems!" Lately, with so much emphasis on American Sign Language and deaf culture, I have even heard that deaf children should not be raised by hearing parents. When a well-meaning deaf colleague said that to me, I suggested that he give me his hearing children to raise. We all need to be careful not to make sweeping statements about what is best for all children. None of us really has all knowledge, but by working together we can share knowledge.

7. *Parents need to have as much information as possible to be able to make the best decisions for their children.* In my opinion, teachers should not try to make a child fit their communication philosophy, but rather give parents the full range of information needed to make the needed decisions. Help them understand the ramifications of various communication modes, so they can make decisions based on information, not philosophy or ideology. Help them learn the child's communication.

I have taught several parents to sign, and remember one mother whose profoundly deaf child was in a school for the deaf. She had had no opportunity to learn to sign, and felt totally incapable of communicating with her 15 year old son. She had been told by the school that she should not sign to him, but to encourage him to speak. About six weeks into the sign class, she reported tearfully about her son asking her a question with his poor speech. She answered in her awkward signs, which he understood. Suddenly, they both started to cry. They had communicated! She had not told the son she was trying to learn to sign, but after that her skills zoomed, and so did their relationship. What a waste of 15 years.

8. *Be aware of the ramifications of the various communication methodologies before pushing a"pet" one onto parents.* I advocate use of Total Communication, based on our experiences with Bob and Joel -- one of whom is oral/aural, the other primarily manual. We didn't know in the beginning which method would work best for them, so we tried literally everything: signing, both English and ASL, sound amplification, hearing aids, mime, writing. I would be careful, however, in telling other parents to use the same methods we did. But, it seems hard to know whether one method or another is best for a very young child, and so unfortunate later to see

a child as an 8 or 10 year old "failure". Given the current pressures for ASL, it would be easy to push for this method, and totally miss what is really best for the child.

I was so pleased that Robert Panara, professor emeritus of NTID, recently spoke out on this issue, because I value his opinions and experiences as a product of American deaf education. I was also interested to read that Dr. Donald Moores of Gallaudet University has written that research does not prove that ASL or any method is better than another: rather that early diagnosis of deafness, parental acceptance and the beginning of early communication and training in a way the child can access are the most important criteria. Not ASL, not oralism, not any one single method can be said to be best for everyone. Each individual is unique. Surprise!! We must be sure to give balanced information, and help parents understand the compromises tied to each mode. I have interpreted for NTID students who could not communicate with their own parents or family, because the parents had been told, "Don't learn to sign, or he will not even try to talk with you."

9. Try to help parents learn the communication mode preferred by the child, whether it is manual or oral. Communicating with an oral/aural deaf person requires an understanding of speech-reading that is as important as learning the manual system used by a signing child. Remember, we professionals don't know everything there is to know about deafness yet. We may not even know the most important things. Sir Winston Churchill reportedly once said, "Home is the place that, when you go there, they have to take you in." If a child doesn't satisfy our perceptions of what they should do, or how they should act, it's all too easy to "send them home." The parents have to take them in. But what happens to the child? What happens to the family? I have heard many students talk about going home for holidays and sitting alone, or with no meaningful communication with anyone in the family. Such students actually prefer to stay on campus rather than go home.

10. Parents can help teachers in getting what they think a child needs, and can help teachers meet their own needs, too. In the United States, and in other countries to more or less extent, under current legislation parents play a very important role in educational placement. If they are kept informed of their rights and responsibilities, of the ramifications of placements, communication, support services, etc. , *they* play the crucial role in accepting or not accepting the recommendations of the Committee on Special Education. Help parents become well-informed and aware, and they can make your job easier. Wearing my NTID hat, I often make presentations to Committees on Special Education or administrative groups, telling them what the parents of the child in question have told me to say. Other professional colleagues have done the same for us. Sneaky, perhaps, but effective!!

11. Parents who approach a school from an adversarial stance rarely will achieve what they want. If teachers understand the pressures on parents, the stresses they have to deal with daily, they can help relieve some of the stresses by being as diplomatic as possible. They can give parents advice on the best approach to take, and with whom to talk. The frustrated parent does not always know the appropriate person, or even the appropriate request to make. They don't know the jargon, the educational language, and might be afraid to question the educators. I remember being asked by an administrator, of whom we were asking questions he did not want to hear, "Are

you questioning our competence?" In that situation, we were, but it would have been better not to make it so confrontational. Communication broke down, which was not as productive as continuing dialogue. Parents may not understand the reasons for certain actions. Teachers can help make sure they do understand, before it becomes a crisis.

12. *Give parents good news more often than bad news.* When I saw "The Wiz" on Broadway I cheered when the Wicked Witch of the East (I think) sang "Don't Nobody Bring Me No Bad News!" I still feel fear each time the phone rings -- what's happened now? Even now, I am constantly afraid that something is going to go wrong. Help parents feel proud of accomplishments also, don't always be giving them only the bad news. Some things teachers have used with us that worked really well were a weekly or daily journal in which we or the boys could write about things that were happening at home, notes from class, the daily information sheet from the school itself about what had been announced over the public address system, a monthly newsletter prepared by the children – whatever works. It doesn't have to be fancy -- just communicate and encourage parents to communicate with the school.

13. *Help integrated deaf children and their parents get to know deaf adults, or at least older deaf students, other deaf children.* I remember bringing a tall, athletic NTID student to visit a class of 7-year olds with deaf students there, and the deaf children were totally impressed with seeing a big, deaf man! I have heard students say they thought they would either die or become hearing after they finished school – they had never seen a deaf adult. Help them to become truly bi-cultural, able to interact with deaf or hearing people with equal comfort. The most successful NTID students are those who feel at ease with deaf *and* normally-hearing people. Few deaf children are born to deaf parents, less than 10 percent I believe, so it seems unfortunate to encourage students into a cultural identity that will totally cut them off from their families. I recently talked with a deaf colleague, graduate of a school for the deaf, whose preference is ASL, and who wants no interaction with hearing people who cannot sign. I asked her if she felt that her using ASL had cut her off from her family, and she said, "Sure -- but that's just necessary if you're deaf." It seems to me it doesn't have to be this way. Remember my earlier statement, that parental involvement is one of the most crucial variables in educational success? How can parents be meaningfully involved in a situation they can't understand, with children with whom they can't communicate and who don't want to communicate with them?

14. *Give parents information about the child's program in writing, not just though conferences.* Teachers should make sure parents understand the classroom situation, what types of support services their children are given, what the roles of the notetaker, teacher of the deaf, speech teacher, and interpreter are. Parents can help their children understand how to be the best users of support services. If students learn how to give feedback and suggestions to the notetaker and interpreter in junior and senior high school, they will be so much better prepared to take advantage of these services in post-secondary education.

15. *Help parents to see that equal access and equal opportunity also mean equal responsibility.* In their role as a deaf educator, and advocate for students, teachers

should not give give them so much protection and buffering that they are not really getting the same education as the hearing children in the school. That is no favor. When Bob was first integrated into middle school, he had a teacher of the deaf, a notetaker, speech teacher – the full range of support personnel. So what did he do? He sat in class and turned off his hearing aid, knowing that he would get the notes and tutoring later, anyway. The teachers put up with this for several weeks, and we didn't know what was going on. Finally, in a conference, one teacher said, "I'm very bothered when Bob turns off his hearing aid and doesn't pay any attention to what is happening in the class." I was horrified -- but asked her what she would do if Bob weren't deaf? She had a list of interventions, ending with the last resort of his being sent to the Vice-Principal. I asked if she had done any of these things, and she said she hadn't. So I said , "Do them! Give Bob the same responsibilities of attending, working, producing as everyone else. He'll not get any free ride from an employer when he's older, nor will he be accepted by his hearing peers if he's exempt from expected behavior."

In our efforts to take away the difficulties of the educational situation, let us not forget that the students have to learn coping strategies, learn to be their own advocates, because we are not going to be around all their lives. Believe me, this is one of the most difficult things parents have to face, standing back and watching, wanting to rush in and "make it better". Help parents see the necessity of letting go, of giving responsibilities, and letting the ramifications happen when responsibilities are not met. Our son Joel attended a school for the deaf for a few years, and was rarely given responsibilities for even bringing information home, or even anything as simple as ordering his own food at noon. All decisions were made for him, with few choices or occasions to accept responsibility and live with the choices, though we asked the school to treat him more appropriately to his age. Now, at age 25, he is still not able to act independently, though he is of normal intelligence. I believe this is a danger for all of us who work with deaf students, and it seems to be patronizing, not helpful. We must all learn to let go, and encourage parents to do the same.

Conclusion

Obviously, these comments could be expanded much further, and made specific to parents of differently-aged children. The teacher's approach would obviously be different whether she is working with parents of a kindergartner or a teenager, but the general concepts are applicable to any age. This is a subject close to my heart, as can be deduced from this brief list. My concluding thought is that parents can and should be important members of the educational team, but they often do not know how. Professionals can assist them in learning and fulfilling their roles, and I encourage each of us to accept this challenge, and encourage parents to assert their rights, accept their responsibilities. When parents and teachers work more closely, the educational situation will be more effective and satisfying for everyone concerned.